



News Release

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FIRST NATIONS GIRL'S TRAGIC STORY SHINES LIGHT ON SYSTEMIC SHORTFALLS

VICTORIA – The tragic suicide death of a 14-year-old girl living in a rural British Columbia First Nations community reveals a child protection system that is not reaching the children who need it most, a Representative's investigation finds.

The B.C. government is responsible for protecting vulnerable children and it must, without fail, provide the necessary services to ensure their safety and well-being, said Representative for Children and Youth Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond. She recommends that the governments of B.C. and Canada work with First Nations leaders to remove barriers to those services for children and families in First Nations communities.

That is the lead recommendation from *Lost in the Shadows: How a Lack of Help Meant a Loss of Hope for One First Nations Girl*. The report details how this girl's glaring needs for child protection, mental health services and special needs support went largely unmet due mainly to a dysfunctional child welfare system in her region and lack of communication between various social workers and health professionals.

"Most British Columbians will find it unbelievable that what happened to this girl could be allowed to occur in our province," Turpel-Lafond said. "There were a great number of services and supports this girl did not receive during her short life, which likely contributed to her death. This is a story of a virtual collapse of our system, which resulted in a loss of hope and tragic consequences for this girl and her family."

From birth, the girl lived with the episodically threatening and sometimes physically abusive behaviours of a mother who had a serious mental illness, including hearing auditory hallucinations instructing her to "snap" her daughter's head. The girl also struggled with her own cognitive disabilities which were identified early in her school years, although never fully investigated or addressed. She suffered physical and emotional abuse in both her home and her community and it is likely that she was sexually abused by at least one older adult and by a peer. In her teen years, she faced her own mental health issues and began acting out toward others and harming herself.

The girl did not receive adequate attention or services for any of these challenges. The seemingly obvious warning signs were never fully acted upon by the people or organizations who could offer her the services that might have saved her life.

“I’d like to thank this girl’s family and the leadership of her community for agreeing to share very painful details of her life and death,” Turpel-Lafond said. “I ask that, with the public release of this report, the media respect the family’s privacy.”

One of the Representative’s main findings is that even though multiple medical professionals recognized the girl was in danger living with her mother, they failed to report the risk to the Ministry of Children and Family Development. “By law, every citizen has a duty to report suspected child abuse or neglect – there are no exceptions. Those working with children and families must not be silent bystanders. They must respect the law. I’m urging government and professional bodies to address this issue.”

The Representative also repeats her recommendation from the 2012 report, *Honouring Kaitlynn, Max and Cordon: Make Their Voices Heard Now*, calling for the Ministry of Health and MCFD to improve service coordination and collaboration for families that include a parent with a serious mental illness. These bodies should take immediate steps to ensure staff and professionals understand the risk factors.

The report finds that this girl was largely invisible to those who could have helped her. One of the main reasons for that was an under-resourced and chaotic MCFD regional office. In the final few months of her life, this office had only one fully delegated child protection worker when it was supposed to have seven. Combined with a large caseload, a vast geographical area to cover, and problems getting access to the girl’s reserve, this led to errors and misjudgement that jeopardized her safety. “MCFD needed to act and it didn’t,” Turpel-Lafond said. “At a critical time, it decided not to investigate concerns on-reserve and vacated its duty to this child and others. I expect MCFD to act to protect children and not allow any circumstance to prevent it from discharging its duty to investigate child abuse and neglect.”

The Representative recommends that MCFD undertake a comprehensive assessment of staffing, workload and safety challenges in this office and others and develop a plan to address identified issues. She also recommends MCFD, in conjunction with the Health and Education ministries, delegated Aboriginal Agencies and the federal government, ensure that mental health supports and special needs services for children and youth in this First Nations community and others are equitable to those in any B.C. community. This report finds that was certainly not the case for this girl.

“It will be difficult for British Columbians to learn about this vulnerable girl and the torment of abuse, including sexual abuse, that she suffered with little or no help,” Turpel-Lafond said. “Too often, such abuse in First Nations communities occurs in silence. This report is difficult, but necessary to place a focus on this issue as well as the systemic problems that left this girl with a choice no child should have to make.”

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